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Aides said to sell Reagan a plan doomed to failure

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WASHINGTON — A small group of White House staffers persuaded President Reagan to mount a doomed covert operation in Iran as a way to thwart the Soviets and gain the freedom of U.S. hostages in Lebanon, according to knowledgeable administration officials.

Playing on the president's distrust of the Soviet Union and his compassion for the kidnapped Americans and their families, the staffers won out over some of Mr. Reagan's key advisers by vastly understating the risks and exaggerating the benefits, the officials said.

"There is no way it could have worked. The people who sold the president on this ought to be fired," said one official familiar with many of the details.

Once the president approved the operation, the Israelis were called on to play a key role in setting up contacts with Iranian intermediaries and arranging shipments of arms to Iran, the officials said.

"The Israelis had been trying to get us involved in Iran for years," an official said.

Details of the plan were kept secret for 18 months, until the embarrassing disclosure last week that, contrary to its declared policies, the United States had been involved in clandestine arms deliveries to Iran as part of an effort to free hostages held by Iran's clients in Lebanon and to strengthen moderate factions in the Iranian leadership.

The revelation by a pro-Syrian magazine in Lebanon may have harmed the chances of freeing the hostages and jeopardized the position of Iranians the United States hoped would normalize relations with Washington once the ailing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini leaves the scene as Iran's ruler, officials said.

As more of the operation has become known, it has caused a deep split within the White House and angered veteran diplomats in the State Department who were kept in the dark about the operation while they pressed foreign governments to re-

train from providing weapons to either side in the six-year-old Iran-Iraq war and never to reward terrorists or kidnappers by yielding to their demands.

A senior administration official who is closely identified with the disputed policy said yesterday that the White House used the CIA in the operation from the outset but didn't inform the intelligence oversight committees in Congress, as the law requires.

The Intelligence Oversight Act of 1980 requires that the House and Senate intelligence committees be notified of covert operations by U.S. intelligence agencies, usually in advance. The law does allow the president to provide notification after the fact — "in a timely fashion" — and to tell Congress "the reasons for not giving prior notice."

However, the law specifies that after-the-fact notification is to be used in "rare, extraordinary and compelling circumstances."

According to the senior administration official, the "compelling circumstances" included a risk to the hostages if word of the plan leaked.

"We state unequivocally that we have complied with all of the appropriate laws involved. . . . There are occasions where the president can do the consulting and reporting to Congress after the fact," he said.

A Senate intelligence committee source said, "There is no precedent for this."

Because of the way the law is written, the source said, "they can do it." But he forecast that when Congress reconvenes, the Democratic majority will tighten that loophole and consider bringing the National Security Council staff, which hatched the Iranian plan, under surveillance.

U.S. government officials critical of the plan included experts on the region, one of whom said, "The operation never had a chance."

It was based on the premise that the United States could effect, to its advantage, a complex, volatile and extremely fast-moving struggle to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini, the 86-year-old theocratic fundamentalist, the officials said.

They also pointed to the United States' unhappy experiences in dealing with Iran's Islamic republic, whose first major act of foreign policy after it was installed in 1979 was to seize the U.S. Embassy and hold its inhabitants hostage for more than a year. The standard reference to the United States in official Iranian discourse is still "Great Satan."

In earlier American attempts to strengthen "moderates" in Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, the result has often been loss of office, if not of life, by Washington's candidates, the officials said. The risk is no less now, they said.

It was only a matter of time, they said, before some Iranian faction discovered what was under way with the United States and exposed it, putting whatever "moderates" the Americans were dealing with on the defensive.

Especially controversial, some officials said, was the secret mission to Tehran in May by Robert C. McFarlane, the former national security adviser.

According to Iranian reports, which followed disclosure of the mission by the Lebanese magazine *Al Shira* last week, Mr. McFarlane showed up at Tehran airport with a cake and a Bible inscribed by President Reagan.

"There seems to be some irrational group at work here. A cake? What for? And in the present circumstances a Bible is particularly not appropriate," said a longtime government specialist on Iran.

The senior administration official identified with the operation said disclosure by the Iranians "was one of the risks we considered from the very beginning."

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"I think — I'm trying to decide how much more to say — there is a lot of political infighting going on now in Iran. There have been arrests of quite a number of people. The various factions are jockeying for position. And it's my assessment that the reason that Bud's [Mr. McFarlane's] trip there was revealed has to do with that political infighting. There is, as I said, the radical faction opposed to an improved relationship with the United States," he said.

According to Iranian reports, Mr. McFarlane was kept in a Tehran hotel for five days and was not allowed to meet Iranian officials. Other accounts, however, have him in negotiation with unnamed officials about Iran's making peace with Iraq, normalizing relations with the United States, ending support for terrorism, helping gain the release of American hostages and keeping the Islamic revolution at home.

Following the McFarlane visit, a high Iranian official, Mehdi Hashemi, was arrested along with some of his followers. Mr. Hashemi had been one of the foremost advocates of spreading the Islamic revolution to such places as southern Lebanon, where Shiite Moslems loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini have seized American hostages.

Some U.S. officials consider Mr. Hashemi's arrest "very likely related to our efforts."

Another significant development

following Mr. McFarlane's trip had to do with Iran's long-planned "final offensive" that was to knock Iraq out of the war. On the basis of observed deployments of troops and artillery, U.S. intelligence expected the Iranians to launch the offensive in the second week of September. But Iranian leaders, including the increasingly powerful speaker of parliament, Hashemi Rafsanjani, decided to postpone it. The troops are still in place.

Some U.S. officials said evidence about the delay in the offensive is less clear. But, said an official, "we would like to think there is some connection" to American policy.

Government experts on Iran fault the McFarlane operation for still another reason. They say that Iran, for reasons of tradition and history, eventually would seek to restore normal relations with the United States.

The timing must be of Iran's choosing, but the United States must avoid appearing as a supplicant, they say.

"We must go to them as equals. If we go as a supplicant we will be treated as such. The Iranian tendency would be to hear what you have to say and then give you a kick in the pants as you leave," said one expert.

Details of Mr. McFarlane's visit were scarce on the American side, but in a speech last week, Mr. Rafsanjani said of the Americans who came to Iran:

"Their immediate aim was to turn us into interceders in Lebanon, and their distant goal was to create the amicable relations and the golden vision that they had in mind. They begged, pleaded and sent messages requesting that one of our country's responsible officials receive them. . . . We said: No!"

U.S. officials who favored the operation said it followed feelers from the Iranian side and went through several stages of contact, including an expression of American "good faith" that involved the shipment of arms to Iran last year by a third country the officials wouldn't name. That shipment preceded a secret presidential directive signed in January allowing exceptions to the American arms embargo to Iran.

Asked whether the channel to Iran is still open, a senior administration official said, "Our best assessment at this time is, at least of this moment, the channel is still open. Whether it will remain that way is speculative."

Meantime, government officials skeptical of the American operation said there was no evidence that the Soviets had been making any inroads into Iran. Because of Iran's historic distrust of the Soviets, the Islamic revolution's opposition to communism and the 1982-1983 crackdown on the Iranian Communist Party, there are very few active supporters of the Soviets in Iran, according to one expert assessment.